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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

NEKUIA: THE INANNA POEMS

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Nekuia: The Inanna Poems" submitted by Karen Lawrence in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Douglas Barbour
Supervisor

Date March 29, 1977

ABSTRACT

"Nekuia: The Inanna Poems" is a cycle of poems which deal with a mythical theme, the descent of an individual to the underworld. The subject is the goddess Inanna, who was a Sumerian deity of the third millenium B.C.

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anaesthesia

1.

the shaven skull gleams yellow
black vectors
intersect
at point of incision.
she grips the little red book
as the gowns and masks
attack
she is awake
straining
her neck to look
at the doctors smiling
and the camera jerking
in the sweaty grip of an unseen technician

the scalp's red edges
fly
apart
at the touch of the knife
the room heaves

the masks chatter:
these men have reached an agreement
about the contents
of her little yellow skull
a hand reaches in
to the hole in her head
almost to the wrist
jerks out something soft
purplish
it is dropped into a silver dish
held up, first to the lens
then to the woman's
face

she smiles as though she recognizes it.

anaesthesia

2.

sleep
perform the operation
while she
sleeps.

she drinks the sweet gas
sips it like wine
only the lips do not touch
the rim of the glass

this lady left earth
and heaven
went down
into the pit
the road was dark
the night
she has fallen
the sword spins down
shrieks as it meets bone
voices of men
clicking of metal instruments
a hush -

they have discovered
the poems
deteriorating in her brainpan
like a bag
of small, bruised pears.

I

from
the summits
of heaven
she looked into the pit

she was a goddess
on the summits
of heaven

but her heart was in hell

O Inanna
on the summits

Your heart in hell!

from a hymn to the worm

1.

the worm that we know
is a multi-coloured
self-seeking
tail sucker.

he dwells in the dark
of the bowels and heart.

he relies heavily
on unhappiness and fear
to get him through his days.

he is the sacrificial animal
of idiots.

he is crafty:
if you hold a piece of raw meat in front of your lips,
his pinhead pokes out to sniff it.
but he will not eat.
he wants fresh pulsing gut.

the worm that we know
is a gizzard pecker
come to peck yours.

from a hymn to the worm

2.

i am the goddess

whose body
is the temple

of a worm.

is there any way
to speak
of the invisible
the nameless malignancy
made firm
in the soft, cold flesh
of the worm

of his water-thin blood

his radiant eyes,
which glisten like stones
stuck in his flat head

of the bone in his tongue
which can bore into
the great muscle
of the heart

and of the roots, which twine themselves there?

i have pleaded with the worm
to leave my insides
offered tears and burnt grasses
i have cut off my hair
and fed him bloody meals
which i could hardly swallow

but his cold heaviness
throbs still in my belly
in the night
i feel him
turning and crawling
when i walk
i hear only the low humming of the worm

from a hymn to the worm

3.

in the rainbow garden
i offer myself
an offering to myself

from a hymn to the worm

4.

if you needed a diet of worms
you could have

anglearmy
boll
cankercaterpillarcottoncut
earthearorcornear
fire
galleyglow
inch
leech
measuring
pin
round
shipsilkspile
tapetobaccotomatotramatodetussah
webwirewood

that is,
worms classified as to

home
function
shape
size
destructive properties and
social class.

II

You don't tell me what you have found.
You only tell me what you have lost.

-Akkadian proverb

the tower

the queen builds a tower
to heaven

with the skulls
of unsuccessful suitors.

walls of the skull sweet and moist
and moist of walls the sweet skull
of moist sweet skulls and the wall

moist and sweet wall of the skulls
and sweet of skulls the moist wall
the wall of skulls sweet and moist

from a hymn to the worm

5.

could it be
that evil becomes me
and under less profound circumstances
than these
you, the worm
and i
could pleasure ourselves
endlessly
with ennui
loose talk
and the witless kick
of pure pain?

from a hymn to the worm

6.

oh worm
you bless my dreams
with the cruelty
shining
in your round black eyes
you are a single-stringed instrument
you are elegant
as a swan

there are fingerprints on my heart
they are all yours

she had a loveliness -
it was said of her
how she carried her beauty
like the rising moonlight

in the coldest room of the tower
she waits, presses
dried fruit
to her lips
what is here
for the lady
giver of delights?
her arms ache to embrace
a child,
a tree, a young goat

she attends the monthly buzz and shudder
of unseen organs
the cat peers into the bowl
between her white thighs
wipes them adoringly
with wet noseleather
she bends to him
he inhales love syllables from her lips

in dreams
her friends are all become sick
and old
they clutch at her robe
upon waking
she finds
two small red
holes
in her hand

she has not soothed her insides
with a man
for months

in dreams
she feels a warm and dark presence
undresses slowly
and makes a pale necklace of her arms

she craves the bed of queenship

she craves the bed

her dress is woven of the tongues of cows

she craves the bed

the earth is tied to her foot as a sandal

she craves the bed

the eldest daughter of Sin

she craves the bed

she is a life-giving wild cow

she craves the bed

coming down now full
from the tower
just the idea
lashed to the brain

she set her mind upon below
set her mind on it
she set her mind upon below
down to hell she walked away

walked away down
the not seen
she moves as
ripples in tall grass
shadows on water
tall in the land moving
a green shoot in a dead land
her heart is piping in the wilderness
like a bird complaining

III

she sets forth
with a darkened face

the always laughing
always rejoicing maid
the maid Inanna

how she weeps!

she takes up her clothing
the perfect stones
and walks down
to
the
city.

it is afternoon
it is after
          he puts out his hand
          for the rod
          at the gate
that she sees

          the first looming
          of the dark city

the worm sings to her
    rich, slow voice
    of the worm
    who lives
in the small ruin of her heart

euphorbia splendens

the coldest month
moon dangerously swollen
in a white sky

grey birds screaming,
hungry.

he stood framed in the doorway
face frozen in glass
the heavy wooden
mask
grinning on his shoulders
a rag drawn across the loins
go in.

she entered the room
paleness
of a dry, stripped dogbone
voices murmuring
in empty
stone jars
something burning
in a back room
he was wearing a red shirt
he was asking if she
would like
some coffee.

she stood by
the window
rubbing the smooth carved bear
the devils clawed at the glass
nipples stiffened
in fear
fingers wrapped themselves tightly

around his ten year-old
crown
of thorns
shugurra,
the desert crown
taken howling from her head

the blood moved slowly
out of the small round holes.

his hand holds out the white cup
they drink together in the smoky room
quiet.
it is after
noon and he is smiling
and wearing a red shirt

her heart was frozen in hell

<u>have a throat</u>

the throat
smeared with sticky salve
which burnt
blotches into the skin

burned down to the throatbone
the throat *inside* scraped
where did she find the bandages
-scarves woven from dried weeds and sticks
-socks bursting with pickers
wound
like tourniquets
fastened with pins

fascinated reading the
watkins tin
pinhead print tells how
to make an ointment
ball the size of a pea
wrap it in
gauze
and
swallow it.

(could the greasy pellet streaking
down your gullet
heal in passing
or
did it sit
in a pit
down there
giving off
beneficial fumes?)

we know, then
that followed nights
of dark, itching fire
(insane, trying to blow
downwards
some cool
breath
for the
suffering neck)

pain drawn like a bow
across the cords of her throat

and mornings
when came
the stripping:

she stood with eyes closed
swaying on her feet a
little feverish
to receive the cold, sweet shock
of air
on her throat
(raw, sticky skin)
making the throat *inside* scraped
the *sore* throat
feel like a tube of
porcelain

-again, a whole instrument

come closer
here
lift your arms
open the robe
and give us your breast stones
and the pectoral gems
that dazzle men

these also
she loses

take the maiden
uncover her heart

in the fifth year she comes to the fifth door.

the gatekeeper at the fifth door is herself,
leaning easily against the stones, smiling a little.

here she realizes she has always been the gatekeeper

the gatekeeper takes the golden ring
she does not ask "why do you do this?"
she says "i feel that i hold a key in my hand"

this was in the fifth year at the fifth gate

by this gate art thou measured

-Ezra Pound,
"Canto XLVII"

at this last

the robe falls
to her feet
a stiff heap
flesh meets water
at the edge
is no turning

step down lady:
this is the pool.

1.

in the middle of a burnt lake
we sit
and discuss the advantages
of imprecise vision

faces float
serious
in the steam
there is hope in this pool
there is talk of spirit river

2.

out of this element
between water and air
looms the face
looms the face
of the drowned man
a dark planet
in the vapour

clouds move toward us
lowering
like huge dark hands
there is hope in this pool
there is talk of nó name creek

3.

one eye opens
its dark breathing cell
looms calm and speckled
in the steam
in the face of the stranger

an eye
upon which all eyes are focused

there is hope in this pool

from a hymn to the worm

7.

of evenings
the light-shy
worms
conduct their business
migrants on the
long lonely journey
from the stomach:
to think of
families
of eyeless creatures
whole civilizations
nurtured
in a blind alley

you can see them
if you shit in a warm place
if it's too cold
they burrow
into the warm shit
sometimes
you can remove them
with a finger

in the light
they burrow
into the warm finger

in legend
they wait
in candy and cake
warmed in the gullet
they awake
squirming
sharp nips
go forth and
blind heads poking

the body:
an infested tube

from a hymn to the worm

8.

there is a powder
licked from a blade
makes molars firm
in sockets, enamelled
the jaw a studded strut
hung by a muscle

from a hymn to the worm

9.

all things created
canals created the marsh
the marsh created
a toothache-making worm
he who went weeping
tears
flowing before Ea:

i starve in this bowl of dust
give me to eat
give me to drink
that i do not wither
like a piece of dry grass

the apricot is yours, worm
the ripe fig

pah! what are fruits to me Ea?
lift me up
for my sucking
lift me to dwell among teeth
and gums
in that cave i will suck blood
from a white tooth
there i will gnaw at gums
and feed upon roots

from a hymn to the worm

10.

the illuminated chart
crabbed with cavities
crude brown slashes
in enamel
enamel

there is nothing like a root here

IV

You have gone.
So what?
You have stayed.
So what?
You have stood.
So what?
You have returned.
So what?

-Akkadian proverb

if you feel happy then

go as you

are you feel

happy if you

are and you

are happy if you

go as you feel you

are

if you feel like smilin and

feel happy as you

are laughin then

you feel as you

go you are happy if

you feel you can

go as you

are

and the forests will echo with laughter
and it makes me wonder

-Led Zeppelin,
"Stairway to Heaven"

in the rainbow gardens
is the joy of totems

eyes swirling
dark circles in wood

flowers
dive
frilled heads first
into the earth
yellow roots kicking -
the soil shakes hugely with laughter

these gardens hum
there is the inner jazzline of roosters,
combs
blasting off like cherry bombs
happy with
music and
being headless

the totems are welcome in our gardens
the lady hears wind
whistling through headholes
mad toothless heads
open laughing in forests alone

my vagina is fine
yet it is said
among my people
that it is useless for me

-Akkadian proverb

once the lining was fresh
now it's withered and dead
the walls of my uterus
no longer are red

alas! it has happened
the thing i most feared
my sweet breasts have dwindled
i'm growing a beard

oh who will pry open
the closed gates of horn
and dig out this monster
who will not be born?

dat ole debbil worm

who dat dancin
wid dat
ole debbil worm?

dat da she-god

what she want
wid dat
ole debbil worm?

she gon shake im loose
shake im loose
shake im loose

to tell the truth

about inanna
scholars say

inanna was ambitious
and agressive

inanna was determined
to become
mistress
of the underworld

inanna had a
long-standing reputation
for deceit

it is true
her name has no
red-flannel reliability
if gary moore
brush-cut and bow-tied
shouted

Will The Real Inanna Please Stand Up?

i don't know if she would

but scholars
they have the breath of fishes

you think this is some

kind of joke

a worm

and a garden?

V

ashes ashes ashes
into the tomb the great queen falls

demeter kore demeter kore demeter kore
demeter kore demeter kore demeter kore
kore demeter kore demeter kore demeter
kore demeter kore demeter kore demeter
demeter kore demeter kore demeter kore
kore demeter kore demeter kore demeter

i speak to you
as the eldest daughter of Sin
i am the goddess
who has the key
who is second to
no one of the gods

my sister straddles
the throne of hell
naked
she must have her husbands
her children
the Bearing One
in her are all the motherwombs assembled

no sheet covers her well-kissed breasts
naked
as a pitcher

'my entrails, o my entrails'
this sister moans

i have seen her lips caress
the cold skinny prick
of death
this one

in the rainbow gardens
the two queens meet

naked inanna
falls to her knees
in the dust
with swollen tongue and throat
too dry to speak

the bearing one enters
squats on her seat
legs opened
dimly red and shining
in the darkness

in these halls of dust
is no stirring
no striving
all time waits
for the Death
and the Birth

this is the hour
this is the hour of eternity

in the mind
death is organic
we are constantly informed
of its presence
        the faint shadow in a mirror
        a breath, swift indrawn
a photograph:
                the hand reaching
                                out

in the eye
it waits, darkly shining
the eye holds only stillness
gazes neither in front
      nor behind
returns its own glance

and again, the same

death sings
death sings tonight in pulsing genitals
death dances
death dances in your lover's face
death laughs
death laughs in our ears as we sleep

so the gatekeeper did not stop you
so the vizier did not say 'wait'
so you stand now
in front of the spike

there will be no
taking up of the robe here
nothing to keep you from drowning
in the dust of hell
nothing to keep
your nakedness
from the eyes of your sister
on her throne
from the eyes of the hopping spirits
the annunaki, which surround her
they fasten the eyes of death upon you
there is a spike waiting for you here,
lady.

here is the place
which finds your deceit
your pride
your impatience
your lust

your baleful heart is beyond soothing

naked the goddess kneels to receive her death
all eyes become fastened upon her
the eyes of death

seven judges utter the word
which tortures the imperfect spirit
howls in headholes
like a sick animal

the queen of heaven sickens
for her they built the house of the heart
the queen of heaven sickens
for hers was the power to destroy the indestructible
the queen of heaven sickens
for in her was all healing found

nowa danca deatha
nowa danca deatha
nowa danca deatha
nowadeath
nowadeath
nowadeath
nowadeath

her body was a corpse
that hung
on a spike

birth cries echo in the rainbow gardens

VI

What is above

is below

<u>august</u>

in this hottest month
of purification
i address you
i
    the Lady of the Wilderness
    the Lady of Desolation
    the Lady of All Eventualities

i have lived six weeks
in the edin
  the valley of bones
hungered and thirsted
and dust and clay
have been my food

no man or woman has come to me
and i have gone to no woman or man

i have seen the worm
he has come to me
in the dry heat of day
and at night, in dreams
his seven elements have tried
to suck
    the last warm breath
    from my chest

i have seen in my cup
a fear of damnation
a fear of the one word spoken
                the name

in the room

1.

in this room
i am dead
you are dead

2.

in the spring
i get on a plane
and travel to a warm climate
i lie on a beach
i visit a prison
i ride buses
when i return
i carry a lighter suitcase
and leave it, still packed, by the bed

3.

in the summer
you take to the road
and stay with friends, converts, family
you play cards
you drink tequila in the desert
you sell leather belts
when you return
you carry a bunch of sagebrush
and leave it in a bucket outside the door

4.

in this room
you are dead
i am dead

i leave this room
i am alive

you stay in the room

milk fever

you're right it's
no good to cry over spilled milk
but only a fool
wouldn't change milkmen

-Marylou Dietz

you have not tasted milk
from an animal
only from waxed cardboard, glass, plastic
milk from an animal
might taste raw, dirty, genital
might be buzzing with microbes
which your pale
soft stomach
wouldn't know what to do with

when all the containers are broken
you will have to lick
your milk
off the floor
as it drips from the table
you drink a lot of milk
it will take a long time
to get enough
the milk mixed with hairs and crumbs
will sicken your tongue
make your throat convulse

you could lap milk
from cupped hands
but it would be animal, sweat and dirt

a woman's nipple
warm and alive in your mouth
is out of the question.

what are we going to do
about you
and your milk?

death comes calling

we watch television
we watch a documentary
about a tribe
of leftover mayans

against trees
the men lounge in shapeless dresses
puffing big cigars
they are
all beautiful
the women mash corn in a trough
it will ferment
the men and women will drink the mash
at their corn ceremony
they have
rituals
for all the seasons

we have
the blue glow
in this cold room
it is all
the motion
we have

you leave the room
and start screaming
i watch you on the floor
you lie on your back
shivering
you tell me you think you are
dying

your death comes calling
the lacondones smile shyly
at the camera
a voice tells us
there are approximately three hundred lacondones still an existence

i cover you with a blanket
later i will tell you
that i see your death
every day

i cannot comfort

tonight
the air spiced
with the sin-sweet smell
     of the evening mushroom
the worm and i
will suffer
a parting of ways

i will put him from me
i will raise the dead
i will raise the dead
                    eating and alive
                                so the dead
                                        outnumber the living!

She is coming
Inanna is coming from the pit!

hellwise the spiky demons scurried
from out of the dry land

where hearth is barren
where sky threatens
where milk-churns
jiggle no longer
in our laps
and milk sours
where coyote stalks the lamb
where seed lies scattered
on dry ground
where river and stream run fouled

scurried like bats
through sunless halls of the dead

She is coming
Inanna is coming from the pit!

eat not
from the fields of the dead
drink not
the water of death
they asked for the corpse
hanging on a spike
sixty times scattered
the food of life
the living water
Inanna stood up alive
out of the dust and

She is coming
Inanna is coming from the pit!

VII

from the chapter
of the coming forth
by day

one cool wet morning
you will meet
The Lady
who comes Forth
out of Darkness

standing beside the river
you will look up
and see
The Eater of the Dead

perhaps you will walk
in early summer
with
The Shining One

give it to her
give it up
to her

give it to her
give it up
to her

when the wild bull comes to her
he comes with a chant
a chant to move her heart

from a love-song to the lord of light

1.

last night
as i
the queen
was shining bright

last night
as i
the queen of heaven
was shining bright

as i was shining bright
as i was dancing alone
as i uttered a song
to the coming
night

he came to me
the lord
he heard my song

he came to me
the lord of light
he heard my song

from a love-song to the lord of light

2.

the night bird sings a wild note
as i
    gaze upon him
as i
    caress the lord
his hand he puts
                on my hand
as i
    rejoice in him
his heart he puts
                next to my heart
as i
    give life to him
his song brings deep joy
                in the night

i will drink with him the fresh milk
                the sweet cream
i will watch over his house of life

from a hymn of the goddess to herself

it is a bright new crescent
it is a hillock for me
        high and wide in the plain
it is a fallow field
        where the uz-bird pipes with longing
it is wet ground, soft and rich

who will plow it for me?

lady, the king will plow it for you
he lies waiting at your side
the king will plow it for you

plow it for me, my love

she craves the bed of the singing heart
she craves the bed
she craves the bed of the sweet lap
she craves the bed

by his sweet, by his sweet bed
by his honey bed of the rejoicing heart
by his honey bed
by his sweet bed of the honey lap
by his sweet bed

he covers it for her
   covers the bed for her
he covers it for her
   covers the bed for her

from a love-song to the lord of light

in the hot sun
he meets me
and we rejoice together
in his honey bed

his green gaze waters the plain
he is a sprouting garden
he is the honey-man
the honey-man
of the gods
favoured
of my womb
whose lips are honey
whose hands and
limbs and cheeks
are sweet
honey
he sweetens me ever

he prepares a sweet, fruitful couch
in the midst
of the house
my sweetener
of the navel
he is sweet lettuce
my wild bull
of the fair thighs

his green gaze waters the plain
he is a tall leafing tree
he is the honey-man
the honey-man
of the gods
sweet lettuce
of my heart
his is the honey
of my mouth
the sweet juice
of my holy lap
he sweetens me ever

In me
find the Mother

I awake and
  stand up
          shining!
You have gathered my flesh together

My left side
is joined to my right side
and my hands hold high
the reedshoots

I am covered
with my
       womanly beauty
I have the wings and feet
of a bird

I am praised and
  come forth
          loved!
You have given me my heart again

from the many tales
of her splendour
her great triumphs
her healing hands
she has selected these:

Afterword

The tablets and fragments which provide the text of the goddess Inanna's journey to the underworld were excavated at Nippur and at Ur. They were inscribed in the first half of the second millenium B.C. The date of their composition is unknown; but because Sumerian literature goes back to the middle of the third millenium B.C., most scholars estimate the composition date to be somewhat earlier than the date of inscription. For translations of the texts, I have relied primarily on Sandars and Kramer, and have compared their versions with others taken from texts listed in the bibliography and from the translations of the Ur tablets in the Sumero-Akkadian Collection, British Museum. Following is a brief summary of the main events of the myth.

Inanna, Queen of Heaven and goddess of the fertile earth, decides to visit the underworld. Though some scholars hypothesize about her motives, nowhere do the texts indicate a reason for her journey; in this she differs from the hero figures - Ishtar, Odysseus, Heracles, Orpheus and others - who succeeded her. Her journey takes place in summer, in the dry season of purification, when water is scarce. Before she leaves the earth she garbs herself in her divine garments and 'powers', and instructs her minister Ninshubar to mourn for her and plead with the great gods to save her life if she has

not returned within three days. When she reaches the outer door of the underworld, she commits a sin by lying to the gatekeeper about the reason for her visit; she says she has come to attend last rites for her brother-in-law. The gatekeeper consults with his mistress and is given permission to allow Inanna to enter. She must pass through seven gates, and at each one a garment is removed, until she enters the halls of the dead, naked.

The Sumerian conception of hell is difficult to envisage. The gate of hell is a gaping monster, the jambs are 'a sharp knife to slash down wicked men'. The *Edin* is a place where one can drown in dust - a desert, a Death Valley. Yet in hell also lie 'the rainbow gardens of the Lady' which Sandars compares to Virgil's asphodel meadow, a place for the refreshment of the dead. Kramer asserts that 'the very idea of paradise (as a garden of the gods) is Sumerian'.

In hell Inanna meets her sister, Ereshkigal, who reigns as Queen of the Underworld and sits naked on her throne. The *Annunaki*, the seven judges of hell, fasten the eye of death upon Inanna and she sickens and dies; her body is hung on a spike.

Meanwhile, Ninshubar does his duty and implores various gods to save his mistress. Each of them answers that she is insatiable and must suffer the fate she has brought

upon herself. But Enki, the water god, is grieved, and so fashions the *Kugarru* and the *Kalaturru*; to these two sexless creatures he gives the food and water of life and instructions to scatter these libations upon the goddess' corpse. They travel to the underworld and revive her. As she is leaving hell the *Annunaki* remind her that she must leave another in her place, for no one ever left hell without paying a price.

Inanna now ascends from the pit with the devils of the underworld fastened to her, walking with her. She travels from city to city in Sumer. On the way the party encounters various subjects of the goddess whom the devils want to abduct to hell as hostages. But Inanna refuses to let them be taken. Finally they meet Dumuzi, the shepherd-husband of Inanna, who neither makes obeisance to her or appears to be in mourning as he sits high on his throne. And upon him she fastens the eye of death. Sandars' translation concludes 'This was how holy Inanna gave up her shepherd into the power of the devils'.

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